

The Educational Leader Role (3)

Meaningful assessment of the curriculum-

The Educational Leader (EL) is something which is relatively new, only being a defined role since the introduction of the 2011 Education and Care National Regulations. However, it was not uncommon even prior to 2011, for services to have one educator who would step up and guide the programming. Most often this person was the director. The most commonly recognised element of leading the curriculum was 'programming audits'. When the role of educational leader was first introduced there was little guidance over what the role really entailed (as we have covered previously), but the one thing everyone seemed to understand immediately was that programming audits were now the responsibility of the EL. This was the one clear cut duty which could easily be transferred into the new system. Or so we thought at first. But as the National Quality Standards continues to define itself, the focus on critical reflection is re-emphasised regularly and the way programming audits have historically been completed is not at all reflective. So, for the purpose of this piece we will be exploring the concept of a 'curriculum assessment' which is critically reflective in nature, and promotes more purposeful curriculum decision making.

The importance of 'curriculum assessment'

An understanding has always existed that there needs to be fluidity in the approach to curriculum in any early childhood service. It is the role of the Educational Leader to ensure there is an overarching strategy to the set up of each age group's programs. This is not to say everyone has to observe, plan and reflect in identical ways, but that each program reflects the same elements and is guided by the pedagogical beliefs outlined in the service philosophy (as described in "The EL Role – Constructing Meaningful Philosophy"). And this is where the difficulty lay, for to ensure autonomy, professional thinking and accountability in your lead educators, you must give them a voice in how they manage their curriculum planning and reflection. For the EL, the fine line to walk is to ensure there is a fluid curriculum which also reflects individual

pedagogy. One way to do this, is to collaboratively plan approaches to curriculum and then engage in ongoing assessment of that curriculum.

In addition to ensuring a fluid approach to programming, the Educational Leader must also take responsibility for ensuring each age setting/room is meeting the elements required by the service policy, the National Quality Standards, and the Education and Care National Regulations. There are certain aspects to programming which must be observed, such as the planning cycle and the five outcomes outlined in each guiding document, which the EL needs to be certain are being met throughout the service and for each individual child. Curriculum Assessment is an opportunity for the Educational leader to sit and formally engage in a review of their pedagogical documentation and how it is meeting the expectations required of it.

A reflective format

One of the most common formats, historically, of 'programming audits' was a simple checklist. However, like our idea of how to observe children has evolved beyond the checklist, so must our observations of each other (which is essentially what any review, audit or assessment is). A programming checklist which only ensures each child has been observed, or each box has been filled, is not conducive to critical reflection or quality improvement. Choosing a more reflective format will encourage a deeper level of intentionality in program design, planning and implementation. Furthermore, as your curriculum and the assessment itself, should be a reflection of your service philosophy, creating your own format for assessment is also important. For example one way of doing this might be, simply breaking the program down into the steps of the planning cycle, and jotting down some reflective bullet points under each. The important element will be that the EL will be writing thoughtful reflections on each program rather than just checking to ensure elements are complete, allowing them to focus on quality over quantity. If you are worried certain elements might be missed in this way, then you can always have a checklist beside you to remind you what you need to look for. But thinking 'outside the box' is important, if one is to ensure the process is meeting individual needs of educators. Not everyone will fit in the same box after all!

Be prepared for a big job!

Curriculum Assessment is no small task. It can take considerable time to read through observations, plans, and reflections from each age setting, particularly in larger services. In fact, in some services it can take days to complete this. Because it is such a big job (especially when done well) it is something which you may only want to perform once a quarter. Many services take a less reflective approach (the checklist) and complete it each month. But if one is to reflect meaningfully on the programs, you would probably find yourself stuck in a never-ending cycle of assessment if you were to perform them this frequently. An in-depth process on a quarterly basis will have more benefits for the service quality and educator development. One of the wonderful aspects of online programming systems such as “Tapestry Journal” is that it allows you to quickly analyse children’s individual progress against the outcomes which is a huge help, and alleviates a lot of the time involved in assessment. They also usually allow you to view a bigger picture of educator participation in observation, curriculum planning and reflection. Having said this, to allow for an in-depth and critically reflective process the EL will need to take the time to actually sit and read individual contributions to the program, taking notes as they go, so they can effectively guide educators forward.

Thinking beyond the tick box

As mentioned above, there are certain elements which can be checked within Curriculum Assessment and they will have a simple yes or no answer as to whether they are occurring. However there are other factors to programming which require a more thorough review to allow for quality improvement. Curriculum assessment should not simply ask “Are we completing what is required of us?”, but go beyond into exploring “How can we improve our pedagogical documentation techniques and approaches to ensure best outcomes for all children?”. Educational Leaders will need to reflect on the quality of planned experiences, how they observe the philosophy around practice, the quality of writing and how it reflects professional language and the principles and practices of the Early Years Learning Framework; and much, much more. What you will be looking for in these assessments will be guided by philosophy

as much as the National Quality Standards and Early Years Learning Framework. For instance a service heavily guided by research into nature and risky play may look for different characteristics in their assessment, to a service which is more guided by trauma informed practice and mindfulness (not to say these can't go together also). The idea is that the process is deeply reflective.

A collaborative approach

When 'programming audits' are completed they are often handed back to educators and that is where the process ends. However throughout the National Quality Standards there is a huge emphasis on collaboration. Additionally, any quality Educational Leader will want to give their educators a voice and ensure a clear understanding of the expectations around pedagogical documentation. Simply handing an educator a set of ticked or crossed boxes is not going to inspire them to then reflect on how they can improve their practice in this area. Thus, it is important, that once the Educational Leader has completed their Curriculum Assessment, they have the opportunity to sit with the lead of educators of each age setting (at the very least) and discuss the points made within the assessment. This will allow for a clear understanding and also afford the educators an opportunity to justify and explain their choices where appropriate. One must remember that there is no absolute right, or wrong way to present your documentation and this allows for individual approaches to be observed and considered.

Using Curriculum Assessment to guide quality improvement

Curriculum Assessment is one of the easiest formal leadership styles of service self-assessment to engage in (more will be discussed in future articles in this series). Each time a Curriculum Assessment is completed the Educational Leader should be identifying areas for improvement which can be then transferred to the Quality Improvement Plan. The wonderful thing about the National Quality Standards is that each quality area supports and feeds into each other. As we move further through this series we will discuss more on how different reflection and assessment techniques can inform each other, but for now it is important to recognise that any self assessment methods being

employed, provide the foundations for a good quality improvement process. Furthermore it is through this assessment process that you will begin to identify specific strengths, which you may not even have been aware existed within your service, and it is just as important to demonstrate these in the Quality Improvement Plan.

Conclusion

Taking the established idea of a 'programming audit' and developing it in to the critically reflective and collaborative approach of 'Curriculum Assessment', really gives it a place within the newer systems of the National Quality Standard. There is simply no better way for Educational Leaders to ensure they are producing quality pedagogical documentation throughout the entire service. Curriculum Assessment allows the EL to set, review and sustain their expectations for the programming and planning cycle, while also giving each individual educators a voice in its design and implementation. Furthermore it allows educators and the Educational Leader opportunities to engage in reflection and collaboration around practice, which is something we see continually emphasised within our frameworks. Quality documentation should be a priority in all early childhood services as it provides the foundations for a quality early childhood education.

References

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